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FRANCE

Silent Witnesses

Tears streamed down the cheeks of Moroccan Interior Minister Mohammed Oufkir as he bent to kiss the hand of his monarch. King Hassan II had just expressed complete confidence in the hawk-faced general, and angrily denied French charges that Oufkir had had anything to do with the mysterious kidnapping and supposed murder of Leftist Leader Mehdi Ben Barka. All very stirring, but on closer inspection it developed that the tears in Oufkir's eyes were caused not by gratitude but rather by a cataract usually hidden behind his sunglasses.

Like Oufkir's tears, nothing in the Ben Barka case was as simple as it appeared last week. The irate indignation of France and Morocco, expressed by a reciprocal recall of ambassadors, was not followed up by a severance of diplomatic relations—indeed, both Paris and Rabat took care not to aggravate the situation. France still demanded Oufkir's arrest; Morocco refused it. While King Hassan maintained complete silence on the crucial matter of Oufkir's whereabouts on the October weekend that Ben Barka disappeared, Charles de Gaulle kept mum on his own police force's involvement in the kidnapping. And when a French magistrate finally played a tape recording reputed to carry the incriminating testimony of Paris Gangster Georges Figon (a participant in the plot who "committed suicide" just before French cops burst through his doorway), all that was heard was a trite cops-and-robbers script for a movie that Figon was working on.

That left the question of who kidnapped Ben Barka just where it had been before: wildly up in the air. Key witnesses to the Left Bank snatch were still in hiding or not talking or dead or simply unidentifiable. Gaullist Deputy Pierre Lemarchand—a close friend of Figon and French Interior Minister Roger Frey, and himself one of the *harbouzes* (bearded ones) who serve as De Gaulle's super-CIA—testified before an investigating magistrate that a handful of French cops had accepted \$200,000 from the Moroccans for helping kidnap Ben Barka, but insisted that neither Frey nor *le grand Charles* knew anything about the plot.

While French opposition parties cried for explanations, Gaullist newspapers wondered innocently if the American CIA might not have pulled the whole operation in order to eliminate a leftist, and at the same time embarrass De Gaulle. The fact remains that four of the five persons so far in custody for the kidnapping are Frenchmen. That blatant bit of embarrassment must have struck someone in the Elysée Palace last week, for suddenly Paris began "wondering" his body has yet to turn up.

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